THE BIG QUESTION
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Psalm 27
Psalm 77:1–10
Luke 13:1–9

"Has his steadfast love ceased forever? . . .
Has God forgotten to be gracious?"
Psalm 77:8, 9

Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers. It is not all that popular an idea, even among Christians. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, only that is not the God we have got. What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them— not from a distance but right close up.

Barbara Brown Taylor
God in Pain

She made an appointment to come see me. "I only need twenty minutes," she said. "I want to ask you two questions." She was smart, successful, had a great job with important responsibility; she loved to travel, had lots of friends. On the day of the appointment, she arrived promptly, sat down, took a Kleenex from her purse, and told me that the malignancy she had battled so courageously and so successfully had returned. This time it didn't look good at all. "I'm here to ask two questions. And I want answers. Why is this happening to me, and what did I do wrong?" "It's just not fair," she said, "and I wish I had some answers. It's why we pay you, I think. You're supposed to have answers, aren't you?"

We talked. We talked many times over the next year. We talked about the oldest questions in human history: Why do people suffer, and does God have anything to do with it?

Barbara Brown Taylor remembers a story a friend of hers told about her son, Jeff, when he was a toddler. I like this story because little Jeff adored his grandfather. It was back in the days some of us remember, before seat belts, when it was not uncommon for a young child to stand on the front

seat with his or her arm around the driver's neck. I can't believe we actually did that, but we did, and I still remember the feel of a three-year-old's arm around the back of my neck as one of life's more pleasant experiences. In fact, there is an odd behavior that I, and people my age, exhibit when it is necessary to slam on the brakes. Some of us still, automatically, put our right arm out to protect and steady the three-year-old who used to stand there.

That's what happened to Jeff. A dog ran in front of the car. His grandfather slammed on the brakes. Jeff fell into the dashboard and bumped his head, not seriously, but painfully. He cried and cried and through his tears asked his beloved grandfather, "Paw-Paw, what did I do wrong?" (*God in Pain,* p. 57).

It makes her want to sit down for a little cry of her own, Barbara says; "that child's loss of innocence is something we all have to suffer. We get through ten or twenty years in our lives believing in a universe that rewards good and punishes evil, until one day life slams on the brakes and we learn the truth: you can do everything right and still get hurt. Goodness is no protection from pain." A tornado rips through a high school in Alabama and students die; a bus flips over and wonderful young people are killed.

We know about this, most of us do. Innocent suffering is the great challenge to our faith. When it happens—and it does to all of us, sooner or later—it feels like the sun has stopped shining. We feel empty, alone. We try to pray and can't. All we can do is ask, "Why?"

Throughout history, philosophers and theologians have struggled with the question of evil and the fact of innocent suffering. Gallons of ink have been spilled on the question: If God is good and loving and powerful, why do innocent people suffer? (see *Friday, Saturday, Sunday: Literary Meditations on Suffering, Death, and New Life*, p. 82).

French philosopher Voltaire, pondering the tragic Lisbon earthquake back in the eighteenth century:

> Was there more vice in Lisbon found
> Than Paris, where voluptuous joys abound?
> ("Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," 1756)

Modern American poet Billy Collins, pondering the granite statue of a long-dead Civil War general:

> And there was I . . .
> down on my knees, eyes lifted,
> praying to the passing clouds,

forever begging for one more day.
(*The Trouble with Poetry and Other Poems,* p. 12)

From Holocaust survivor Eli Wiesel, asking at Auschwitz, "Where is God?" to Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall's wonderful collection, *Children's Letters to God*:

Dear God,
Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones,
why don't you just keep the ones you got now?
Jane

and,

God,
I would like to live
900 years like the guy in the Bible.
Love, Chris

The Bible wrestles with the question. It came up one time when two terrible tragedies occurred during the life of Jesus. People must have talked about them A group of faithful Jews from Galilee, Jesus' home as well, traveled to Jerusalem to make sacrifices in the temple, a religious obligation. For some reason, maybe to teach a lesson in Roman power, maybe because he was capriciously and brutally violent, perhaps just for amusement, the governor, Pontius Pilate, ordered his guards to kill them—at worship, so that their own blood mixed with the blood from the sacrificial animals. It was a terrible, meaningless tragedy. Was it because they had sinned, done something wrong? Some said so. And the tower of Siloam, on the city wall, collapsed. Eighteen people died, maybe construction workers, and the scaffolding collapsed; maybe they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Was it because they were worse sinners than everyone else in Jerusalem? Some said so. No, Jesus said, these two tragic incidents did not happen because of anything the victims had done. His age was inclined to believe that tragedy was the result of God's judgment. Suffering is God's punishment for sin. It's what the story of Job is about. Job wrestles with it. Job's friends tell him his suffering is the result of something he has done. Job, by the way, doesn't buy it. Likewise, health and wealth and happiness are God's reward for good behavior. Jesus is here contradicting conventional wisdom. These tragedies were not the will or work of God.

We're still trying to attribute suffering to God's judgment on human sin. AIDS, some preachers insist, is God's punishment. Hurricane Katrina was God's wrath inflicted on the people of New Orleans for their sinful lifestyle. 9/11 happened, the televangelists confidently announced, because God

lifted the veil of protection around our nation in anger at Roe v. Wade, abortion, homosexuality, and feminism.

And personally, even though we may reject those anecdotes as morally repugnant and inconsistent with Christian faith, it seems that we almost cannot help asking: Did we bring this on ourselves? Did we do something wrong? Is my lack of success, my failure, my failed health, indication of some deep flaw in myself?

Jesus said no and added his voice to an old and rigorous conversation in the Bible, a dialogue.

On the one hand, the beautiful Twenty-Seventh Psalm, which Jesus would have known and which we read this morning, promises that there is nothing to fear; evildoers, adversaries, and foes will stumble and fall. God will shelter in the day of trouble. It's a strong affirmation of trust in God.

It is not, by the way, a Pollyannaish, superficial promise. The people who wrote and read these psalms were consummate realists. Their own experience as a people was marked by suffering, military defeat, exile, captivity. These are not easy promises but affirmation of a faith that upholds and strengthens people even in the middle of suffering, a faith for tough times of deadly pestilence and arrows flying and destruction stalking and when God seems to be absent.

In fact, the other voice in this dialogue—the question of "Why is this happening?"—is also in the Bible, without ambiguity or flinching. Psalm 77:

> "In the day of trouble I sought the Lord," the psalmist wrote
> —and nothing happened apparently—
> "so when I think of God these days,
> I moan.
> I spend most of my time remembering the good old days when all was well.
> Has God's steadfast love ceased?
> Has God forgotten to be gracious?"

Faith dares to ask those questions. Faith is not afraid to ask, "Why is this happening? Where is God in this?" Faith sees in those questions themselves a deep trust. Faith understands and experiences God, God's mercy and love and kindness, even in the experiences of God's silence and absence.

C. S. Lewis said that suffering was God's way of getting our attention, waking us up to deeper things. He called it his "alarm clock theology." And then he fell in love and married Joy Davidman, and her cancer and death literally undid his neat explanation of suffering. In *Shadowlands*, the play

about his marriage, Lewis faces the audience, with his wife in her hospital bed, and confesses that his alarm clock theology was too glib. Nothing can explain or make sense of this. There is suffering so deep that it simply will not do to dismiss it as God's teaching us something (Michael Lindvall, *The Geography of God*, p. 114).

God, we believe, has created us to be free. God's power is the power of love, like a parent's—not control, but a love that watches as the child grows and moves out into the dangerous world, full of risks, trouble, and tragedy, a love that shares the child's every experience.

We do learn through suffering, however—not because God is causing it to teach us something, but because suffering softens us, makes us more tender and caring, opens us to one another, to humanity's hopes and dreams and aspirations and disappointments and failures.

One of our defenses against the reality of suffering is denial. It comes in the form of an easy optimism, the glass is half full, not half empty; in popular religion a cheerful piety that just keeps on smiling. It can also be expressed in an adamant refusal to see suffering. Over on LaSalle Street, where we work with Catholic Charities to feed the hungry and homeless, some of the neighbors are complaining because the sight of all those poor people lining up for food is so depressing. Nobody is against feeding the hungry. They just don't want to have to see it.

Sometimes religion itself refuses to acknowledge the reality of suffering. In a new book, *Thank God It's Friday*, William Willimon complains that his church doesn't "do too well in the dark." He remembers the time when every church had Sunday evening services. But with the advent of Sunday night television and *Bonanza* the church stopped worshiping at night. "Too bad," Willimon says, "because a lot of important things in the Bible and the life of Jesus happen in the dark."

He's a Methodist bishop now and tells about a woman who came to him to complain that her church was a happy church. "Everything is so happy and upbeat. The preacher jumps up on the stage at the beginning of the service, just grinning and giggling. . . . He's so insufferably happy: every other word is 'awesome.' All the music is upbeat and giddy." You know," she said, "it's hell to be going through a tough time in your life and have to worship at a happy church" (pp. 39–40).

In some of the newer church buildings, there are no crosses. Well-meaning building committees instruct the architect to leave out the cross. Who wants to be reminded of all that negativity, suffering, and death on a bright Sunday morning? Make it light and lively and positive. Talk about success, not suffering; victory, not defeat.

At the center, however, is the cross and the amazing assertion that God was there, that in that innocent, good man's suffering and death, God's love for the world is completely revealed. At the center is the cross and the amazing affirmation that as Jesus suffered and died, God experienced it all—all of it. At the center is the cross and the assurance that God has experienced the worst that can happen to any of us. At the cross God comes close to your life and mine at its most human and precarious and vulnerable.

In a very helpful book he wrote about the death of his own son, Yale philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff asks the question many of us ask: "What should you say to someone who is suffering?" "Your words don't have to be wise," he wrote. "The heart that speaks is heard more than the words spoken. And if you can't think of anything to say, just say 'I can't think of anything to say. But I want you to know I am with you in your grief.'"

What I really need, Wolterstorff said, is to hear that you are with me. . . . "To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench."

That is exactly what Christian faith believes happened in Jesus Christ. God has come to sit beside us—to walk with us, live with us, love with us, suffer with us, and die with us. When a child asks, as every child does sooner or later, why everyone has to die, my experience has been that the best answer is not a lengthy attempt to explain human mortality but a hug.

"We're in this together, God and we," Wolterstorff wrote near the end of the book. And we are.

Jesus Christ is God's promise, God's invitation to trust that all, finally, shall be well, that no evil, finally, shall befall us.

"The Lord is my shepherd," another psalmist wrote—words Jesus memorized as a child, words I am sure he remembered on that Friday afternoon when the worst that could happen, happened.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

Amen.